

VZCZCXYZ0000
OO RUEHWEB

DE RUEHML #1000/01 1280845
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 080845Z MAY 09
FM AMEMBASSY MANILA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4064
RHHMUNA/CDRUSPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L MANILA 001000

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MTS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/09/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: FOREIGN SECRETARY PRAISES REGIONAL DISASTER RELIEF
EXERCISE

REF: A. MANILA 986 (AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH NEW CHIEF OF
THE ARMED FORCES)
[1](#)B. MANILA 985 (ICRC HOSTAGE: 100 DAYS AND COUNTING)
[1](#)C. MANILA 920 (FOREIGN SECRETARY ON PEACE PROCESS
ENVIRONMENTAL COOPERATION AND ASEAN)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney,
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: In a private breakfast May 8, Foreign Secretary Alberto Romulo exuded pride at the Philippines' successful hosting of the ASEAN Regional Forum disaster response exercises, which concluded this week (septel). He expressed deep appreciation that EAP Deputy Assistant Secretary Scot Marciel attended the exercises, calling it a demonstration of strong U.S. support for the initiative. To help others understand the depth of U.S. commitment to the Philippines, Secretary Romulo requested statistics on the impact of U.S. civilian projects through Balikatan and other bilateral humanitarian exercises, for his use at anticipated Philippine Senate hearings on the Visiting Forces Agreement. The Foreign Secretary lamented the lack of cooperation from the Red Cross on the Jolo hostage investigations, which was hindering rescue of the remaining hostage and government efforts to put an end to the crisis (ref B). While the Jolo situation underscored continued challenges in combating terrorism, Secretary Romulo relayed President Arroyo's concern about the designation of the Philippines as a "safe haven" in the State Department 2008 Country Reports on Terrorism, which the Ambassador pointed out is not a new development and does not single out the Philippines. Reiterating earlier requests, Romulo underscored President Arroyo's desire to meet President Obama in mid-June, and said Filipinos would be "thrilled" to welcome Secretary Clinton to the Philippines on her next trip to the region. The government remained committed to passing the Millennium Challenge Corporation indicators, the Foreign Secretary emphasized, and would embark on a campaign to raise awareness about its reforms. END SUMMARY.

ARF-VDR EXERCISE A SUCCESS

[1](#)2. (C) In a private May 8 breakfast, Foreign Secretary Alberto Romulo said the ASEAN Regional Forum Voluntary Demonstration of Response (ARF-VDR) exercises were a success (septel), and that the Philippines was pleased to have welcomed U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary Scot Marciel during the exercises. Romulo expressed hope that another country would host the exercises next year and build on the disaster relief capacity and lessons-learned in the Philippines. While dismayed about the limited press coverage of ARF-VDR, he said he was still proud that the Philippine government had succeeded in such a complex undertaking. The Ambassador congratulated Romulo on the successful exercises, which demonstrated the need and the potential for greater

multilateral cooperation in the region, and said the U.S. was glad to have partnered with the Philippines on this important initiative.

PREPARING FOR HEARINGS ON VISITING FORCES AGREEMENT

13. (C) In preparation for expected Philippine Senate hearings on the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), Secretary Romulo asked the Ambassador for additional data demonstrating the direct benefits of Balikatan and other humanitarian bilateral exercises to the people of the Philippines, including measurements like the number of schools built, number of wells dug, and kilometers of roads completed. This information would clearly illustrate the extent of assistance to communities across the country resulting from the VFA, including programs in places like Albay province, which Secretary Romulo described as a great success. The Ambassador offered to provide the information in support of the hearings, and agreed with the Secretary's glowing assessment of the recently concluded Balikatan exercises, noting that the medical and engineering services provided during Balikatan demonstrated the overall value of our partnership (septel).

CONCERN FOR ONGOING HOSTAGE CRISIS IN JOLO

14. (C) Secretary Romulo and the Ambassador agreed that it was important to resolve the hostage crisis in Jolo, where an International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) worker was still held by the terrorist Abu Sayyaf Group (ref B). Secretary Romulo expressed concern the ICRC was not

cooperating with legal authorities to build a case against the Abu Sayyaf abductors. The Ambassador suggested that the May 7 killing of the Sulu provincial police chief signified declining security conditions on the island, to which an uneasy police-military alliance and a crowded field of hostage negotiators may have contributed. She emphasized it was important to turn the situation around through more decisive action once the hostage crisis was resolved. Her recent discussions with Armed Forces of the Philippines Chief of Staff Lt. General Victor Ibrado (ref A), the Ambassador said, addressed the need for more civil-military collaboration in Jolo, which could help improve security conditions and support economic development.

ARROYO CONCERNED ABOUT "SAFE HAVEN" DESIGNATION

15. (C) Turning to the State Department's 2008 Country Reports on Terrorism, Secretary Romulo said that he thought the report was "positive and balanced" overall, but noted that President Arroyo had asked Executive Secretary Ermita, Chair of the government's Anti-Terrorism Council, and other cabinet members to register their formal concern with the Ambassador about the designation of the Philippines as a "safe haven" for terrorists. The Ambassador suggested that the label "safe haven," which has been used in every Terrorism Report since 2005, was being viewed out of context. The Ambassador noted that the Congressionally-mandated report, which focuses on U.S. counter terrorism efforts, gives a positive assessment of the Philippines and other allies that are also fighting terrorism, including Colombia, Brazil, and Argentina. While the report is not an exhaustive accounting of the Philippines' situation, it nonetheless documents an understanding between the two countries about the need to combat terrorism in the Philippines.

SEEKING OVAL OFFICE MEETING, SECSTATE VISIT

16. (C) Secretary Romulo reiterated President Arroyo's strong interest in an Oval Office meeting with President Obama, and suggested June 7-18 as a possible window for a visit. The Ambassador encouraged Romulo to approach a potential visit as an entry point for a deeper dialogue with the U.S. on

environmental issues, agriculture, defeating extremism, and other topics. Romulo also expressed hope that Secretary Clinton would visit the Philippines on her next trip to Asia, commenting that Filipinos are drawn to her personality and would be "thrilled" to welcome her. The Ambassador said that she would pass on the Secretary's request.

FOCUSING ON MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE INDICATORS

17. (C) The Philippine government was now focusing on the need to pass the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) indicators, Secretary Romulo said, in advance of the MCC board meeting later this year. The Ambassador remarked that while ongoing MCC visits might focus on more technical issues, passing the indicators was really the key step for pursuing a compact. Secretary Romulo said that a team would travel to France to demonstrate to officials there how the Philippines was improving its performance corruption and other indicators.

KENNEY